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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000726

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SUBJECT: ATIKU "OPEN" TO BOYCOTT; BUHARI SAYS "PEOPLE WILL DECIDE"

REF: ABUJA 681

Classified By: Political Counselor Russell Hanks for reason 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Vice President Atiku Abubakar, who won a major victory at the Supreme Court on April 16 which compelled the Independent National Election Commission (INEC) to place his name on the ballot, is "open to a boycott" of this week's presidential election, according to one of his key advisers, Usman Bugaje. Atiku's advisers are telling him that this weekend's elections, like last weekend's, will be hopelessly rigged, and participation in blatantly fraudulent elections is counterproductive. Atiku plans to discuss the possibility of a boycott today in Abuja to see if he can convince other major opposition parties to join with him. The VP, Bugaje said, believes that presidential candidate Buhari is against a boycott but many others in the ANPP are in favor of one. Buhari condemned the April 14 elections, blaming INEC Chairman Iwu and the PDP government. He said that he would not contest election results in court, but would "let the people decide" who the winner would be. Talks are ongoing about creating an opposition consensus on the boycott issue and a decision may come as early as this evening. End summary.

ATIKU CONSIDERS BOYCOTTING THE ELECTION

¶2. (C) In a 30-minute conversation with Poloff at his office on April 17, minutes before attending a key opposition meeting about boycotting the election, Usman Bugaje laid out the case why a boycott makes sense. Bugaje, who ran unsuccessfully for governor of Katsina state, said that his experience convinced him that the fix was in, and this weekend's election would be a fraud. Bugaje described the first round of elections as outrageously fraudulent and said that "INEC officials, police and security agents actively participated in rigging the elections nationwide." He said a number of INEC officials in Katsina were caught red-handed and the tabulation process was subsequently boycotted by party agents as they realized the degree of fraud.

¶3. (C) Bugaje, who had previously been convinced that any election was better than a canceled election, changed his mind one week before the election (reftel). He predicted that the opposition had walked into a trap, in which INEC would declare the PDP the winners no matter what happened on election day. Bugaje asserted that this is exactly what happened, and, therefore, it would happen again in the presidential election.

¶4. (C) Bugaje said that the politics of reaching an opposition consensus was complicated but that the VP was "open" to a boycott, although he would not go it alone. He said that Atiku would go along only if the other significant opposition parties agreed to join in. Bugaje said that Buhari was likely to be against a boycott but today's meeting was intended to be the final check on who stands where. He said, however, that the VP may boycott the election even if Buhari decides to stay in the race.

BUHARI SAYS LET THE PEOPLE DECIDE

¶5. (U) ANPP presidential candidate General Muhammadu Buhari has condemned last week polls and declared he will not go to court to challenge disputed results. In an interview with Leadership, an Abuja-based newspaper with wide coverage throughout the North, Buhari said: "I will not contest the outcome of the presidential election in the court. The people will decide who they want to rule this country and nobody can change it."

¶6. (U) Buhari has criticized the just concluded gubernatorial and state assembly elections. In a press statement, Buhari affirmed: "We of the ANPP presidential campaign committee, view INEC conduct of the last election as a criminal violation of the Electoral Act, subversion of the sanctity of the ballot box and therefore highly condemnable. It is shameful that Professor Maurice Iwu did not prove his critics wrong; rather he demonstrated that he is a biased umpire." The statement added: "It is painful that INEC failed to allow the choice of the people to prevail."

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¶7. (C) Members of Buhari's campaign staff confirmed that the opposition candidates are meeting today and hope to arrive at a "common strategy" to confront the "blatant fabrication of results" witnessed on April 14. They confirmed that many of the Presidential candidates are in favor of boycotting all national elections on April 21, including elections to the National Assembly. The staff member said, however, that Buhari is inclined to participate in the election even though he expects the "rigging to be worse than last week."

PAT UTOMI WITHDRAWS ANYWAY

¶8. (U) Pat Utomi, a candidate who entered the race to try to "make the process credible," threw in the towel on April ¶16. He stated that he was withdrawing because the process could "never be" credible and called for an interim government headed by Senate President Ken Nnamani to be instituted to "save Nigeria from disaster."

¶9. (C) COMMENT: The violence witnessed in the aftermath of the gubernatorial elections, with at least 300 people killed, does not appear to have spent its force. Instead the restrictions on movements, curfews and heavy presence of the military in key areas throughout the country have dampened it. If the candidates, among whom Buhari is the most popular, decide to challenge the rigging in the Presidential round, more violence is likely to occur.

CAMPBELL